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DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, INR/NESA
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NSC FOR E. MILLARD

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SUBJECT: Sri Lanka: Latest poll results appear to spell trouble for PM's party in upcoming elections

Refs: Colombo 470, and previous

(U) Classified by Ambassador Jeffrey J. Lunstead.
Reasons 1.5 (b, d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: Two recent polls on the attitudes of Sri Lankans ahead of the April 2 parliamentary elections seem to indicate that PM Wickremesinghe's UNP government is in trouble. While the polls do not breakdown which party Sri Lankans plan to vote for, per se, they do show that the UNP government is earning extremely poor marks with respect to its handling of the economy, the key issue of concern to voters. It also fares badly on corruption. The UNP's marks regarding the peace process are positive, however. Although there are still two weeks to go before the election, our interpretation of these results is that the President's SLFP party and its JVP allies are ahead in the race at this point. END SUMMARY.

2. (SBU) RECENT POLLS: Two recent polls on the attitudes of Sri Lankans ahead of the April 2 parliamentary elections seem to indicate that PM Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP) government is in trouble. One of the polls was conducted by the Center for Policy Alternatives (CPA), a local think-tank, in early March. (USAID provided funding for this poll. CPA will be publishing more polls ahead of election day.) The other poll was conducted by Org-Smart, a division of the AC Nielsen Company, in late February. The methodology for the two polls was roughly the same: each poll contains results from approximately two thousand respondents and has roughly the same margin of error (plus or minus five percent for the Org-Smart poll and plus or minus three percent for the CPA poll). The ethnic breakdown of those polled in the two studies is also similar, with the majority Sinhalese community being over-represented in the sampling. One difference between the polls was that the Org-Smart poll took place throughout the country, including in the north and east, though its results are methodologically divided between those living in the south and those in the north/east. The CPA poll was not conducted in the north and east, however, where large Tamil populations are present. The polls also do not breakdown which party Sri Lankans plan to vote for, per se.

3. (SBU) BAD NEWS FOR UNP ON ECONOMY: The most striking aspect of the polls was how poorly the UNP fared with respect to economic matters. The Org-Smart poll, for example, indicated that 43 percent of people in the south felt that the President's United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) would be better at handling the economy. The UNP was only mentioned as being a better manager of the economy by 33 percent. In the meantime, the CPA poll showed that 59 percent of those polled felt that their personal economic situation as compared to a year ago had deteriorated versus only 17 percent who said it had improved. The CPA poll also showed that 72 percent of those polled were dissatisfied with the UNP's performance in lowering the cost of living and 75 percent were dissatisfied with the UNP's performance in reducing unemployment. By a factor of 2 to 1, the CPA poll also showed that those polled believe that the UPFA was better equipped to handle economic issues as compared to the UNP.

4. (SBU) The numbers regarding the economy are especially important because it is seen as the top issue for the country. According to the Org-Smart survey, for example, over 65 percent of those polled in the south rated economic-related issues as being the most important, as compared to only 26 percent who rated the peace process as the top issue. In the CPA poll, 62 percent of those polled said the economy should be the new government's top priority compared with 21 percent that said the peace process should.

5. (SBU) Another key area in which the UNP fared very poorly was in combating corruption, with the CPA poll indicating that 60 percent of those sampled were

dissatisfied with the UNP's performance in this area versus only 27 percent who were satisfied with the UNP's performance. The Org-Smart poll also tended to show that those polled in the south believed that the UPFA was better at dealing with corruption than the UNP.

16. (SBU) UNP DOES WELL ON PEACE PROCESS: Despite its poor marks on the handling of the economy and on corruption, one area that the UNP scored high on was its handling of the peace process. The CPA poll indicated that 62 percent of those polled approved of how the PM's party had handled the peace process. In addition, 51 percent said they were satisfied with the amount of international support the UNP had attracted for its peace process initiative. The Org-Smart data revealed similar findings, with 63 percent of respondents from the south rating the UNP's ongoing peace efforts with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) a success. The UNP also garnered a high degree of confidence regarding possible future negotiations, with 59 percent of those in the south feeling that the UNP would be better at dealing with the LTTE as compared with only 22 percent who said the UPFA.

17. (C) COMMENT: Polling is a new and inexact science in Sri Lanka and we are not certain about the results of the two polls. That said, the polls -- coupled with what we are hearing anecdotally -- do seem to indicate that the President's SLFP party and its JVP allies are ahead in this race. After being virtually somnolent, the UNP's campaign has been slowly revving up, however, and the party could stage a comeback as election day draws nearer. Nonetheless, with opinion apparently running strongly negative regarding its handling of the economy and a campaign machine that runs in fits and starts, the situation appears a tad on the gloomy side for the UNP at this point. We will analyze early next week what a potential SLFP/JVP victory would mean on big issues for the U.S. END COMMENT.

18. (U) Minimize considered.

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